DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 709 TM 020 897

AUTHOR Roberts, Sharon Pol; Teddlie, Charles
TITLE Evaluation of the Louisiana Teacher Assessment Program for Interns: Use of the Focus Group Approach.
PUB DATE Sep 93
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Louisiana Evaluators (New Orleans, LA, September 30, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beginning Teacher Induction; *Beginning Teachers; Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Methods; Evaluators; Field Studies; *Internship Programs; Interviews; Pilot Projects; Principals; *Program Evaluation; Research Methodology; Secondary School Teachers; *State Programs; *Teacher Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Focus Groups Approach; *Louisiana

ABSTRACT

The Louisiana Intern Teacher Assessment Program, part of the Louisiana Teacher Appraisal System, began with a preliminary field test, followed by a pilot test and implementation in 1993-94. Evaluation of the preliminary field test was conducted through responses of 223 assessors, intern teachers, principals, and assessor trainers to nine different questionnaires and responses in focus group interviews. The analysis and results of the focus groups interviews (conducted with 74 assessors, intern teachers, principals, and trainers in 10 groups) form the basis of this study. In all, evaluators collected 15 hours of audiotaped proceedings from the focus groups. Focus group participants offered solutions to the problems they perceived with the field test and with the research methodology. In general, participants felt that the system of appraisal had merit, although there were concerns about the rating scales used and assessor training. One table describes the focus groups. (Contains 5 references.) (SLD)

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Evaluation of the Louisiana Teacher Assessment Program for Interns: Use of Focus Group Approach

Sharon Pol Roberts
Louisiana State University

Charles Teddlie
Louisiana State University

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Louisiana Evaluators, September 30, 1993, New Orleans, LA.

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Evaluation of the Louisiana Teacher Assessment Program for Interns: Use of Focus Group Approach

Introduction

The Louisiana Intern Teacher Assessment Program is part of the Louisiana Teacher Appraisal System. The Louisiana Teacher Appraisal System was endorsed by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), approved by the State Legislature and established with the passage of ACT 506 in 1992. The intern assessment program has three phases: (1) Preliminary Field Test, (2) Pilot Test and (3) Full Implementation. The Preliminary Field Test was conducted in the Spring of 1993. The second important phase is the full scale Pilot Test to be conducted during the 1993-94 school year. The Pilot Test is the final preparation for full implementation in 1994-94.

The evaluation of the Preliminary Field Test of the Louisiana Intern Teacher Assessment Program (LTAI-I) was conducted by three-person assessor teams. The information collected was responses of assessors, intern teachers, and assessor trainers to nine (9) different questionnaires and the responses of assessors, intern teachers, and trainers selected to participate in focused interviews at the conclusion of the Field Test.

The analysis and results of the Focus Group Interviews forms the basis of this study. It was necessary to triangulate data that was obtained from two of the nine questionnaires in order to "get the big picture" of the participants' perceptions of the program. The components of the participants' perceptions of the Louisiana Intern Assessment Program included the Global Questionnaire, the Individual Attribute Questionnaire-Open-Ended Comments and the Focus Group Interviews.

Global Questionnaires

Global Questionnaires were sent to all the participants in the Preliminary Field Test, and 76% of them responded to the surveys. The response rate was close to or over 80% for all groups

except the External Assessors, who had a 58% rate of response. The overall response rate was certainly adequate, especially for a one-time mailout.

Both statistical analyses of the closed-ended items and qualitative analysis of the open-ended items were conducted for the overall study, but the qualitative analysis performed on the open-ended items was used to assist in understanding and amplifying some of the focus group information. The qualitative analysis utilized was the constant-comparative method.

In the constant comparative method, narrative data are first unitized (the data are broken into distinct "units" of information), and then they are categorized (a coder assigns unique "categorical" names to each unit of data summarizing the essence of the written statement).

The research questions included closed-ended and open-ended items in a number of areas including the following five: the Assessors' evaluation of their preparation; the Assessors' evaluation of the "reasonableness" of certain actual and hypothetical aspects of the system; the Interns' assessment of whether or not certain mandated events actually occurred; the Assessors' perceptions of the strengths of the system; and the Assessors' perceptions of the weaknesses of the system.

Individual Attribute Questionnaire - Open-Ended Responses

Assessors and interns in the Preliminary Field Test were sent questionnaires asking them the difficulty of rating or demonstrating each of the 27 LTAI-I attributes. The total response rates for all participants was very high - 85%.

An item-by-item analysis of responses to the open-ended query asking for "Comments on Difficulties" of the 27 attributes was conducted and utilized to obtain a better understanding and explanation of the Focus Group Interview responses.

Sixty-four percent (64%) of all respondents made a comment on at least one open-ended item. The response rate varied widely across the items. Eight of the items (#3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 21, 23

and 25) received at least 25 comments. The responses to these items were used to compile the focus group results.

Focus Group Interviews

This Focus Group study was a part of the 1992-93 Preliminary Field Test of the Louisiana Intern Assessment Program, conducted in the Spring semester 1993. The Focus Groups were designed to provide complementary information to that gathered from the Global Questionnaires which each participant completed following the Professional Development Conferences. The Focus Group also provided an arena where answers were obtained to questions that couldn't be asked in other formats.

The study consisted of ten Focus Group sessions held at three sites (Jefferson, Lafayette, and Bossier parishes) in May 1993. The participants were selected using a stratified random selection procedure, with the strata being participant "type" (Intern, Principal, Master Teacher, External Assessor) and site. Altogether there were three Intern Focus Groups, three Principal Focus Groups, two Master Teacher Focus Groups, and two External Assessor Focus Groups. Seventy-four (74) individuals participated in the Focus Groups, representing 33% of the total number of people taking part in the Pilot Study.

FOCUS GROUP STUDY

Methodology

This section of the study details what the Focus Group research questions were and how they emerged. The Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) staff, in consultation with the LTAI-I development and training team, constructed an initial list of research questions - one for the

Assessors and one for the Intern Teachers. The LDE staff then met with the Focus Group consultants and developed a revised list of questions. The two sets of revised questions are found in Appendix 1 (Focus Group Protocol-Assessors) and Appendix 2 (Focus Group Protocol-Interns).

The questions for both groups were divided into the following areas:

(1) Instrumentation and Data Collection

(2) Post-Observation Feedback

(3) Intern Teacher Orientation

(4) Professional Development Plan

(5) Merit of System

(6) Other Comments

Additionally, the Assessors were given a checklist concerning the knowledge and skills that they should receive during their training.

A stratified random sample of Assessors and Intern Teachers were selected to participate in the Focus Group interviews. According to Krueger (1988), the "ideal focus group is composed of seven to ten people with similar backgrounds" (p. 93). For the current study, the participants were grouped homogeneously by both "type" (Intern Teacher, Principal, Master Teacher, External Assessor) and training area (Bossier, Jefferson, Lafayette). Krueger also concluded that the first two Focus Groups "provide a considerable amount of new information, but by the third ... session, a fair amount may have already been covered" (p.97).

The design for the current study called for ten homogeneous Focus Groups with the following makeup:

(1) Three Intern Teacher Focus Groups (one in each training area);

(2) Three Principal Focus Groups (one in each training area);

(3) Two Master Teacher Focus Groups; and

(4) Two External Assessor Focus Groups.

LDE staff wanted more information on the Intern Teacher and Principal groups; therefore, three Focus Groups were held for these two types of participants.

Altogether, 136 of the 223 total participants (61%) in the Pilot Study were invited to participate in the ten Focus Groups. Krueger suggested that researchers over-recruit by 25% to compensate for "no-shows." Thus 12-14 participants were solicited for each of the Focus Groups.

As indicated in Table 1, 74 of the 136 solicited participants

Table 1

Participation Rates in

Focus Groups, by Assessor "Type"

Assessor "Type"	Location	No. of Participants	Number Invited	Participation Rate
Intern	Jefferson	9	14	64%
Intern	Lafayette	11*	14	79%
Intern	Bossier	6	14	43%
Principal	Jefferson	5	14	36%
Principal	Lafayette	6	14	43%
Principal	Bossier	5	12	42%
Master Teacher	Lafayette	9	14	64%
Master Teacher	Bossier	7	12	58%
External Assessor	Jefferson	11	14	79%
External Assessor	Lafayette	5	14	36%
Totals	10 Groups	74	136	54%

* Nine came on date of Focus Group; two others were interviewed later.

(54% of those invited) showed up for their Focus Group session. This averaged to 7.4 participants per Focus Group, which is within the desirable range (7-10) described by Krueger. The participation varied by participant "type": 62% of both the invited Intern Teachers and the invited Master Teachers came to their sessions; 57% of the External Assessors came; but only 40% of the invited Principals came to their sessions. All three Principal Focus Groups had fewer than seven participants.

The reasons for the low participation by the Principals include the following:

(1) No monetary incentive - Krueger (1988) suggested that incentives should be given to Focus Group participants as a "symbol that the researcher is giving something in exchange for what has been received" (p.100). Unfortunately, there were no funds available for incentives in the Pilot Study.

(2) Bad time of the year - Due to the time constraints under which the entire Pilot Study took place, it was impossible to hold the Focus Groups until the end of the school year. This caused severe problems for several of the Principals (especially in the Bossier Parish area), who first agreed to participate and then pulled out at the last minute when it was impossible for the LDE to recruit new participants.

(3) Scheduling errors - In one case (Jefferson Parish), there was miscommunication between the LDE staff (which made all the contacts with participants) and the Principals with regard to the site of the Focus Group. This contributed to the low turnout in that area.

Despite these problems, the Principal Focus Groups were successful experiences, according to the interviewers. Since three groups were recruited, the researchers were able to get 4.5 hours of interviews (1.5 hours per session), and they indicated that the Principal Focus Groups were "active" despite their low participation rates.

It should also be noted that 30% (16 of 53) of all Principals in the Pilot Study participated

in the Focus Groups, and that these participants proportionately represented the training areas throughout the state. This Principal sample for the Focus Group study is, thus, certainly adequate. Incidentally, around 33% (74 of 223) of all Pilot Study participants took part in the ten Focus Groups.

The participants were greeted by the Focus Group team (which in most cases consisted of two individuals). After sign-in and travel forms were completed, the purposes for the Focus Group were described. Salient points that were made included:

(1) The value of the Focus Group methodology was explained.

(2) The impartiality of the Focus Group team was re-iterated (i.e., the two team members were from an independent evaluation company, representing neither the LDE or the LTAI-I development team).

(3) It was noted that consensus of opinion was not sought; instead a variety of opinions were solicited.

(4) It was re-iterated that next year's study would also be a Pilot, and that the results from this year's study would be used to "fine tune" the procedure for 1993-94.

It was then explained that one team member would conduct the meeting, while the other concentrated on taking notes.The purpose for audiotape recording the session was then explained, and assurances of confidentiality of individual responses were made. Any discomfort with the tape recording was then discussed, and the participants were told that if they wanted the tape recorder turned off at any time, the session moderator would do so. In fact, several of the participants asked for the tape recorder to be turned off at certain points (such as during the discussion of specific participants or the trainers), and the moderator complied immediately with those requests.

In all cases, the Focus Group sessions ranged from one hour twenty minutes to one hour forty minutes. The great majority of all the time in the sessions was audiotaped. Altogether, the

evaluators collected 15 hours of audiotaped proceedings from the Focus Groups sessions. Audiotapes and typed copies of the notes taken by the two interviewers were compiled for each of the sessions.

There were six sets of questions asked the Focus Group participants: one set concerned with instrumentation and data collection, which typically took about one-half of the session to complete; a second short set asking questions about POSTobservation feedback; third and fourth sets concerning the Intern Teacher orientation and the Assessor training respectively (together with checklists); a fifth set composed of a question regarding the merit of the system; and a sixth set asking for additional comments and concerns.

As described by Krueger (1988), there is a specific procedure for analyzing Focus Group results. This procedure is different from the constant comparative method of Lincoln and Guba (1985), which was used to analyze the Global Questionnaire data. The constant comparative method involves breaking each bit of narrative data into the smallest discrete bit of information and then categorizing that piece using an exhaustive and elaborate coding scheme.

With Focus Group data, Krueger suggests a more global process, including the following steps:

(1) Reading all the summaries at one sitting and making notes of potential trends and patterns.

(2) Listening to the audiotapes concentrating on one issue or question at a time.

(3) Considering the specific context of the Focus Group and the influence that context may have had on the group processes.

(4) Considering the internal consistency of the responses.

(5) Finding the "big" ideas. (Krueger, 1988, pp.114-116).

Analysis of the Focus Group Study

In analyzing the Focus Group data, we (the two Focus Group interviewers) followed this

procedure. We also performed aspects of the analysis separately and then came to agreement on important issues in joint meetings. The consistency of responses across the Focus Groups aided us considerably in coming to consensus.

The Focus Group data, which is available upon request from the evaluation team, include:

(1) Typed summaries from all ten Focus Groups. These summaries merged the written notes of the two interviewers and are arranged in the order of the questions on the protocol. These summaries are approximately 27 single-spaced pages long.

(2) Fifteen hours of audiotapes from the 10 one and one-half hour Focus Group interviews.

(3) Checklists completed by the participants concerning their needs for further training. (See Appendices 3 & 4 for the Checklist forms.)

With regard to the overall project, we first considered the individual responses to the Global Questionnaires, and then examined the evidence from the Focus Group interviews. In general, there was great agreement between the problems identified in the Global Questionnaires and those discussed in the Focus Groups. The Focus Groups had an extra dimension, however, since the participants were asked to come up with potential solutions to the problems. This report, while restating the identified problems, will also present the potential solutions that the groups discussed.

Results from the Focus Group Study

The results from the Focus Groups will be organized around the research questions identified in the first section of this study. Within each research question section, responses will be presented by type of participant (Intern Teacher, Principal, Master Teacher, External Assessor). Emphases will be placed not only on the identification of problems (which often coincided with those presented in the Global Questionnaire Report) but also on the potential solutions that the Focus Groups developed. The participants were eager to offer solutions to the problems that they perceived, and

this often led to lively and productive sessions.

The questions concerning instrumentation and data collection focused on ways to improve the eleven different forms and the techniques for gathering data using them. Most participants thought there were too many instruments and that it took too long to complete them. The instruments were repetitious, according to the Assessors, who made numerous suggestions on methods for shortening or eliminating them. For instance, the Assessors suggested combining question sets #5 and 6 on the PREobservation Conference/Interview Record, because they both concerned activities chosen to accomplish objectives in the classroom. Similarly, several Assessors felt that question sets #8, 9, 10, and 11 on that same instrument could be combined in some manner, since they were all concerned with student assessment and feedback.

Almost all participants felt that the hardest attributes for Interns to demonstrate were: (1) identifying and accommodating individual differences in students; and (2) teaching higher order thinking skills (HOTS). Both the Assessors and the Interns felt that these attributes should be stressed more in the training and that there should be in-services for those Interns deficient on these attributes.

There was some controversy over the types of rating scales employed: on the interview rating form, there were sliding three-point scales; on the observation rating forms, there were fixed three-point scales. Most Assessors and Interns believed strongly that the scales should be <u>consistent</u>. The majority of Assessors and Interns preferred two-point scales to the three-point scales used in the Pilot Study, but there was a sizeable minority who thought the three-point scales were better. Similarly, most participants preferred the fixed point scales, although a number of individuals believed the sliding scales were better. Another point of concern regarding the observation rating forms was the use of the category "not observed" - several Interns and Assessors were not sure when and how it should be coded.

There were four different forms associated with the Observation Record, and many Assessors wanted some of them eliminated. For instance, almost all Assessors agreed with eliminating the Observation Supplement, which was cumbersome and for which there had been little training. There were several suggestions for improving the Observation Scripting Form, including eliminating it altogether. A consistent refrain throughout all Focus Groups concerned eliminating or combining three forms which seemed highly repetitive: the PREobservation Conference/Interview Record, the Teacher Observation Analysis and Scoring Summary, and the Intern Summary Report (Individual Assessor Rating Form).

Additionally, the Assessors objected to completing the same information repeatedly (their name; the Intern's name; their SSN; the Intern's SSN; etc.). They suggested that the state Department of Education precode all the forms with this repetitive information and place it in the Intern Teacher's packet sent to the Assessors.

The POSTobservation Conferences were especially liked by the Interns in the training areas where they received both individual and consensus ratings from the Assessors. (In one training area the Interns received consensus ratings only, while in the other two areas they received both types of feedback.) The Interns liked the "Teacher Comments" block on the POSTobservation Conference Record.

The participants also found the Professional Development Conference to be useful, although a number of Interns thought the Assessors didn't take enough time to develop the PDP. The form itself was too short, according to many of the participants, although several liked the fact that it was one page long. One Assessor suggested that the form be made one page legal size.

Most of the Assessors complained about the Assessor Training Manual, stating that it was organized in a confusing manner, lacked a Table of Contents, and had instruments spread throughout it. They suggested some practical ways to improve the manual: color code it; put all the

forms in one area of the Manual (such as in the Appendix); include a detailed Table of Contents; include better definitions of the components and attributes; and note plainly on the forms which of them go to the Intern and which do not.

With regard to the POSTobservation feedback, most of the participants preferred the feedback system that was utilized in their training area with two exceptions: the Interns preferred the individual plus consensus feedback system because it gave them "maximum" information; and the two External Assessor Focus Groups (one in each of the two feedback systems) both preferred consensus only feedback, contending that individual feedback could lead to strained relationships at the school site. The majority of all participants preferred the individual plus consensus feedback system, but a sizeable minority preferred consensus only. Those preferring the dual feedback system said that it better fostered the "improvement" goals of the program, because the Interns got more information with which to work.

Comments on the Intern Orientation indicated that it was not long enough, and that the Interns were often not prepared for the PREobservation interview. Many Assessors wanted the Interns to be exposed to the same videotapes and discussions that they were, so that their "expectations" would be similar. As might be expected, the participants selected identification and accommodation of individual student differences and HOTS as the two areas in which the Interns needed the most training.

Comments on the Assessor Training were the most uniformly negative of any made on the system as a whole. As one Assessor put it, the negative training experiences "turned off" many people to the system. The Assessors' criticisms included the following:

> the training was too "rushed"; more examples and clarification would have been useful; the Observation Supplement wasn't covered adequately; the trainers told them that they had to "justify" their ratings and the Principals didn't like this; training on the relative meanings of the "1","2" and "3" ratings was not adequate; and the trainers were not able to rationalize why they chose a "2" or a "3" when the Assessors disagreed with them. The Principals said that the afternoon sessions were disorganized and that there was "too much theory and not enough 'hands-on.'"

Additional comments concerned the fact that some of the trainers were from out-of-state. The Principals, especially, did not like that, asserting that "we have sufficient resources in Louisiana: we don't need experts from Tennessee." The Principals contended that the Louisiana trainers did a much better job than their colleagues from out-of-state. These perceptions are particularly disquieting since the STAR system was also criticized for having the instrument development team serve as trainers.

The question asking for the merits of the system elicited responses that gave a more balanced picture of the participants' overall perception of it. Almost all participants felt that a system of this type had merit, although several also said that their District intern evaluation system already served this purpose. The new system was seen as much more positive than the previous one due to: its emphasis on "improvement" of the Intern through mentoring; the opening of channels of communication among the three Assessors, which was seen as an important by-product of the system; the greater manageability of this new set of attributes, which several Assessors said that a "good" teacher should be doing anyway; and the perception that the system is "fair."

The final comments introduced a few different concerns: all participants thought the 24 hour rule was inoperable, suggesting 48 or 72 hours instead; several Assessors were concerned that the system would turn into a "dog-and-pony" show, although they didn't have many practical methods for avoiding that, outside of "showing up" at the Intern Teacher's class unannounced; most Principals felt that much of the burden of the new system fell on their shoulders, and they were particularly adamant about "simplifying" the paperwork and scheduling; many Master Teachers wanted to be the Mentor Teacher at their school and the Master Teacher (Assessor) at another school to avoid biased ratings and strained relationships; the Principals and Master Teachers were concerned about how they would get compensated for substitutes and release time; the External Assessors were concerned about the time required to perform the assessments, and many felt that

college professors would not do such labor intensive work unless they were compensated; this latter point might not be such a problem since many of the Interns and other Assessors preferred District staff to play the role of the External Assessors anyway.

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